

# New Evidence on the Cuban Missile Crisis: More Documents from the Russian Archives

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The Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 continues to exert an intense fascination on historians, political scientists, journalists, and the general public, and—as apparently the world's closest brush to thermonuclear war—is likely to continue to do so. Over the past decade, the study of this crisis has expanded to encompass a major influx of new sources and perspectives, primarily stemming from the declassification of new U.S. (and British) documents, but also the addition of Soviet and then Cuban archival materials and perspectives—a process expedited by international scholarly projects as well as the anti-communist upheavals that led to the (partial) opening of Russian archives.<sup>1</sup>

The Cold War International History Project Bulletin has previously reported on various new findings regarding the crisis—known to Russians as the “Caribbean Crisis” and Cubans as the “October Crisis”—particularly in issue no. 5 (Spring 1995), which featured an extensive compilation of translated documents from the Russian Foreign Ministry archives in Moscow.<sup>2</sup>

In this issue, the Bulletin presents more translated materials from that repository—the Archive of Foreign Policy, Russian Federation (AVPRF)—documenting various aspects of Soviet policy during the events of the fall of 1962. Most were declassified by Soviet/Russian authorities in 1991–1992 and provided to NHK Japanese television in connection with a documentary on the Cuban Missile Crisis aired to mark the 30th anniversary of the event in October 1992; Prof. Philip Brenner (American University), one of the consultants to the show, in turn, subsequently gave copies of the documents to CWIHP and the National Security Archive—a non-governmental research institute and declassified documents repository based at George Washington University—where they are now deposited and available for research. That collection also contains photocopies of some of the same documents that were separately obtained from AVPRF by Raymond L. Garthoff (Brookings Institution) with the Archive's assistance.

The translations into English came primarily from two sources. Many of the AVPRF documents obtained by NHK were translated by Vladimir Zaemsky of the Russian Foreign Ministry, who granted permission for their use here. For most of the rest of the documents, the Bulletin is grateful to Philip Zelikow, Associate Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University, and Harvard's Center for Science and International Affairs, for commissioning translations from John Henriksen of Harvard. (Prof. Zelikow, the co-author, with Condoleezza Rice, of Germany Unified and Europe Transformed: A Study in Statecraft (Harvard University Press, 1995), is currently involved with two Cuban Missile Crisis-related publication projects, a revision of Graham Allison's *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, originally published in 1970, and, with Prof. Ernest R. May of Harvard, an edited compilation of transcripts of declassified tape recordings of “Excomm” meetings involving President John F. Kennedy and senior advisors during the crisis, which were recently released by the



Kennedy Library in Boston.) In addition, Vladislav M. Zubok, a Russian scholar based at the National Security Archive, translated the records of the two conversations of Soviet Politburo member Anastas Mikoyan (with U Thant and John McCloy) in New York on 1 November 1962, and CWIHP Director David Wolff translated a conversation between Mikoyan and Robert Kennedy.

The translations themselves are broken into three sections: 1) before the crisis, 14 September-21 October 1962 (although for Kennedy and his advisors the crisis began on October 16, when the president was informed that a U.S. U-2 spy plane had photographed evidence of Soviet missile sites under construction in Cuba, for the Soviets the crisis only started on October 22, when Kennedy announced the discovery and the American blockade of Cuba in a televised address); 2) the crisis itself, 22-28 October 1962 (from Kennedy's speech to Moscow's announcement of its agreement to withdraw the missiles under United Nations supervision in exchange for Washington's lifting of the blockade, its pledge not to attack Cuba, and its private assurance that American Jupiter missiles in Turkey would shortly also be removed); and 3) the aftermath, 28 October-10 December 1962 (which included a period of wrangling between Washington and Moscow—and between Moscow and Havana—over the crisis' settlement, especially over the terms of U.N. inspection of the missile removal and the inclusion of Soviet IL-28 bombers in the weapons to be pulled out, which was not finally nailed down, permitting the blockade to be lifted, until November 20).

For the most part, unfortunately, these materials shed little light on the actual process of decision-making at the highest levels of the Kremlin, and minutes or notes of the discussions among Soviet leader Nikita S. Khrushchev and his associates during the crisis have still not emerged.<sup>3</sup> The Russian Foreign Ministry documents did include top-level correspondence between Khrushchev and Kennedy, and between Khrushchev and Castro, but these have already been published elsewhere<sup>4</sup> and are omitted from the selection below, as are other documents containing material already available to researchers, such as translations of press reports, correspondence between Khrushchev and U.N. Secretary U Thant (and between Khrushchev and British philosopher Bertrand Russell), and cables to Soviet diplomats circulating or reiterating public Soviet positions.

Nevertheless, the Russian archival materials presented here make fascinating reading for anyone interested in the missile crisis, in Soviet or Cuban foreign policy, in crisis politics or diplomacy generally, in some of the leading characters involved in the drama (such as Robert Kennedy, Fidel Castro, Mikoyan, and U Thant), or in reassessing the accuracy and efficacy of American policy and perceptions during perhaps the Cold War's most perilous passages. For the most part, they consist of Soviet cables from three diplomatic venues (with occasional instructions from "the center," or Moscow):

- \* the Soviet Embassy in Washington, D.C., including reports from the USSR's newly-arrived ambassador to the United States, Anatoly F. Dobrynin, on the situation in Washington and his meetings with leading personages, and from Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko on his conversation with Kennedy on October 18;

- \* the United Nations in New York, from which USSR ambassador Valerian Zorin reported on debates in the Security Council, and on contacts with other delegates and U.N. officials, and then more senior Soviet officials sent to handle the diplomacy of the settlement, such as Deputy Foreign Minister Vasily V.



Kuznetsov and Mikoyan, reported on their negotiations with U.S. negotiators John J. McCloy and Adlai Stevenson as well as conversations with U Thant;

\* and the Soviet Embassy in Havana, from which USSR Ambassador Aleksandr Alekseev reported on Cuban developments, including the fervor gripping the country when it seemed war might be imminent, the leadership's angry reaction when Khrushchev accepted Kennedy's request to withdraw the missiles without advance consultation with Castro, and the difficult conversations which ensued as Soviet officials, in particular Mikoyan, tried to mollify the upset Cubans and at the same time secure Havana's acquiescence to the measures Moscow had accepted in order to resolve the crisis.

The fact that almost all of the documents below came from the Foreign Ministry archive should induce some caution among readers seeking an understanding of Soviet policy regarding the crisis. Not surprisingly, for instance, they illuminate diplomatic aspects of the events far more than, for instance, either military or intelligence aspects. In fact, the Russian Defense Ministry has declassified a substantial amount of material on "Operation Anadyr"—the code-name for the Soviet missile deployment to Cuba—and other military actions related to the crisis, and the Bulletin plans to present some of those materials, with translation, annotation, and commentary by Mark Kramer (Harvard University), in a future issue.<sup>5</sup> As for Soviet intelligence archives, these have not been opened to researchers except on a highly selective basis; however, a book scheduled for publication in 1997 by Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali is expected to draw on these sources. Finally, as noted above, documentation on decision-making at the highest level of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CC CPSU) remains classified, presumably in the Archive of the President, Russian Federation (APRF).

It is not possible to provide a comprehensive commentary on the significance of the documents, both because of space limitations and also because they may be used by researchers for so many different purposes—not only historians of the Cold War but political scientists, specialists in bureaucratic politics, nuclear theory, and "crisis management," psychologists, specialists in U.S., Soviet, and Cuban foreign policy, biographers of key figures, and many others have looked to the Cuban Missile Crisis for answers and illumination. Best read in conjunction with the other Russian documents published in Bulletin 5 and elsewhere, as well as American materials, the documents below are offered merely as useful raw primary source material rather than as evidence for any particular interpretation. Nevertheless, some preliminary reactions can be offered on a few issues.

#### Pre-Crisis U.S. Military and Covert Policies Toward Cuba

One issue of vital importance during the run-up to the crisis on which the documents here (and in Bulletin 5) provide some evidence is the question of how the Soviets perceived the Kennedy Administration's policies and actions toward Cuba, particularly Washington's covert operations against the Castro regime and the likelihood that it would take more direct military action. They clearly show that Moscow's representatives noted, and blamed the United States government in general and the Central Intelligence Agency in particular for, what it called the "piratical raids" by anti-Castro Cuban exile groups being carried out with U.S. support against the island. Although one does not find specific references to



"Operation Mongoose"—the code-name for the massive CIA covert operation undertaken with the aim of toppling Castro after the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961—the reports of Ambassador Alekseev in Havana and Ambassador Dobrynin in Washington in September and early October 1962 show that Moscow had no doubt as to who was responsible for what the former called the "landing of counter-revolutionary bands of spies and arms" and "constant acts of provocation."<sup>6</sup> Dobrynin's cable of 15 October, for instance, lays out the role of the CIA in supporting actions of the exile group "Alpha 66."

However, the documents suggest that the Soviets had only a general knowledge of "Operation Mongoose"—although Soviet military intelligence (GRU) archives might well contain more detailed reports—and Moscow remained uncertain as to the significance of the American support of the harassment operations—i.e., whether they presaged a direct U.S. military intervention to overthrow Castro—right up to the eve of the crisis. As the crisis approached, however, Soviet officials appeared to feel more assured that U.S. military action against Cuba was not imminent (which to those in the know in Moscow signified that the secret deployment of missiles could proceed safely). In a document published in Bulletin 5, Foreign Minister Gromyko, in fact, cabled Moscow after meeting Kennedy on October 18 in the Oval Office—unaware that the American already knew about the Soviet missile bases in Cuba—that "Everything we know about the position of the USA government on the Cuban question allows us to conclude that the overall situation is completely satisfactory...There is reason to believe that the USA is not preparing an intervention and has put its money" on economic sanctions.<sup>7</sup>

The actual Soviet record of the Gromyko-Kennedy conversation, excerpted here, offers readers a chance to follow in detail this duplicity-filled conversation, in which neither man told the other the most important fact in the situation under discussion. Gromyko dutifully criticized Washington for its actions against Cuba, and acknowledged only that Moscow was providing Cuba with "exclusively defensive armaments" which could not "represent a threat to anybody." Kennedy, for his part, with the U-2 photographs of the Soviet missile bases in Cuba under construction lying in his desk drawer, told Gromyko that the United States "take[s] on trust" Soviet statements about the defensive character of the weapons it was shipping to Castro but reiterated his public warnings that "were it otherwise, the gravest issues would arise." While stressing that the situation had taken a turn for the worse since July as a result of Moscow's stepping-up of military aid to Cuba—calling the situation "perhaps the most dangerous since the end of the Second World War"—Kennedy made no mention of the missiles.

After reading the account of the conversation, it is hard to explain Gromyko's smug assessment that the situation was "completely satisfactory," other than as a spectacular case of wishful thinking (or a blase memo to mask a more candid assessment relayed through other channels). It is clear, from his repeated statements of concern, that Kennedy was trying to caution Moscow to rethink its adventure without tipping his cards—and perhaps even signalling a possible way out of the crisis that had (so far as Moscow knew) not even begun. Repeatedly assuring Gromyko that the United States had "no intentions to launch an aggression against Cuba," Kennedy noted pointedly that, "If Mr. Khrushchev addressed me on this issue, we could give him corresponding assurances on that score," and repeated the offer twice later in the conversation. A little more than a week later, of course, after the world had been



brought to the brink, precisely such a declaration from Kennedy would give Khrushchev the fig leaf he needed to swallow his pride and accept the removal of Soviet missiles from Cuba.

The Russian documents reveal nothing new on the issue of whether, in fact, the Kennedy Administration had been moving toward taking military action against Cuba even before it discovered the existence of the Soviet nuclear-capable missiles on the island in mid-October. In a previous publication, the current author presented evidence that the U.S. government and military undertook serious contingency planning, and even some preliminary redeployments, in September and the first two weeks of October 1962 toward the objective of achieving, by October 20, "maximum readiness" for either an air strike against or invasion of Cuba, or both, although the article remained agnostic on the issue of whether Kennedy had actually made a decision to attack Cuba or simply wanted the option available.<sup>8</sup> Recently, a potentially crucial, yet still problematic, piece of evidence from American archives has surfaced to suggest that, literally on the eve of the crisis, the Kennedy Administration was not on the verge of imminent military action against Cuba.

At issue is a recently declassified purported fragment of notes of a conversation on the afternoon of Monday, 15 October 1962, between Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor. (At that point, the U-2 photographs taken over Cuba the previous day had not yet been identified as revealing Soviet missile sites under construction, a development that would take place only later that afternoon and evening and be reported to the president the following morning, October 16.) During a discussion of contingency plans concerning Cuba, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) minutes—obtained by the National Security Archive through the Freedom of Information Act—paraphrase McNamara as saying: "President wants no military action within the next three months, but he can't be sure as he does not control events. For instance, aerial photos made available this morning show 68 boxes on ships that are not believed to be Il-28s and cannot be identified. However, the probabilities are strongly against military action in the next 30 days."<sup>9</sup> Similarly, a recently-declassified JCS historical report prepared in 1981 evidently relies on those notes in stating (without citation) that in their meeting on October 15, "the Secretary [McNamara] said that President Kennedy wanted, if possible, to avoid military measures against Cuba during the next three months."<sup>10</sup>

If accurate, the notes would certainly constitute a strong piece of evidence against the hypothesis that the Kennedy Administration believed it was headed toward, let alone desired, a military confrontation with Cuba in the immediate future, just before news of the missiles. The evidence is problematic, however, due to an unfortunate case of destruction of historical evidence by the JCS that apparently makes it impossible to evaluate the context or provenance of McNamara's reported remarks (see footnote for details).<sup>11</sup>

#### Berlin and Cuba

One issue which has long intrigued students of the crisis is the nature of its connection, if any, to the simmering U.S.-Soviet confrontation over Berlin—which had quieted somewhat since the erection of the Berlin Wall in August 1961 and the Checkpoint Charlie confrontation between Soviet and U.S. tanks two months



later, but remained unfinished business and a potential flashpoint. Given the centrality of Berlin and Germany to the Cold War in Europe, in fact, some U.S. officials jumped to the conclusion upon the discovery of Soviet missiles in Cuba that their deployment was actually a Khrushchevian gambit to distract American attention and energy from Berlin, where Moscow might make its next move. Indeed, during the crisis, a special subcommittee of the White House "Excomm" (Executive Committee) was formed, under the chairmanship of Paul H. Nitze, specifically to assess the situation in Berlin in the event that the crisis spread there, perhaps if the Kremlin applied renewed pressure there in response to U.S. threats or use of military force against Cuba.

Some evidence has surfaced to show that at least some Soviet officials did suggest the option of opening up a Berlin front in response to Kennedy's speech announcing the blockade of Cuba on October 22. In a toughly-worded cable the next day, Ambassador Dobrynin cabled an analysis from Washington recommending an "appropriate rebuff" that might include "hinting to Kennedy in no uncertain terms about the possibility of repressions against the Western powers in West Berlin (as a first step, the organization of a blockade of ground routes, leaving out for the time being air routes so as not to give grounds for a quick confrontation)."<sup>12</sup> Deputy Foreign Minister Vasily Kuznetsov also suggested that Khrushchev respond with a troop build-up around Berlin.<sup>13</sup> Years later, in his smuggled-out memoirs, Khrushchev blustered that during the crisis, "The Americans knew that if Russian blood were shed in Cuba, American blood would be shed in Germany."<sup>14</sup> But in fact Khrushchev acted cautiously with regard to Berlin and rejected suggestions to mass Soviet forces around the city.

Instead, a different Berlin connection seems to emerge from the Russian documents—that Soviet leaders had, in September and early October 1962, deliberately floated the idea of an imminent intensive diplomatic effort (or possibly a renewed superpower showdown) on Berlin, to take place in late November after the U.S. Congressional mid-term elections, in order to distract American attention from Cuba long enough to allow Moscow to complete its secret missile deployment. Such is, at any rate, the strategy that Anastas Mikoyan privately described to Fidel Castro and the Cuban leadership on 4 November 1962 (published in Bulletin 5) as the one the Kremlin had followed in the weeks and months preceding the crisis: "We let the Americans know that we wanted to solve the question of Berlin in the nearest future. This was done in order to distract their attention away from Cuba. So, we used a diversionary maneuver. In reality, we had no intention of resolving the Berlin question at that time."<sup>15</sup> In the memorandum of the Gromyko-Kennedy conversation on October 18, one can see the Soviet Foreign Minister dangling the Berlin bait, suggesting that a summit meeting between Kennedy and Khrushchev take place in the United States "in the second half of November"—when Khrushchev would attend a session of the U.N. General Assembly—"in order to discuss the issues that separate [the USA and USSR] and first of all the questions of the German peace treaty and West Berlin."<sup>16</sup> Gromyko's message, in turn, came on the heels of a letter from Khrushchev to Kennedy dated 28 September 1962 threatening to sign a German peace treaty—the same vow that had triggered the Berlin Crisis in November 1958, for it implied an agreement between Moscow and East Berlin that would cut off Western access to West Berlin—but grandly (and ominously) informing Kennedy that in deference to the passions of American domestic politics, "we decided to put the German problem, so to say, on ice until the end of



the elections" and will "do nothing with regard to West Berlin until the elections ... [afterwards], apparently in the second half of November, it would be necessary in our opinion to continue the dialogue."<sup>17</sup> "Some sort of crisis relating to Berlin is clearly brewing now, and we will have to see whether we can surmount it without recourse to military action," Dobrynin quoted Kennedy as saying in a background meeting with reporters on October 16 in a cable to Moscow three days later.<sup>18</sup> On the same day, with evident satisfaction, Gromyko reported to the CPSU CC after his conversation with Kennedy that in recent days "the sharpness of the anti-Cuban campaign in the USA has subsided somewhat while the sharpness of the West Berlin question has stood out all the more. Newspapers bleat about the approaching crisis vis-a-vis West Berlin, the impending in the very near future of a [Soviet treaty] with the GDR, and so on." Gromyko even detected a White House-inspired propaganda campaign "to divert public attention from the Cuba issue."<sup>19</sup>

Only afterward did Mikoyan, at least, realize that at the October 18 encounter Kennedy had been playing along with Gromyko just as Gromyko had been deceiving him—as soon as they discovered the missiles, he related to Castro, they "began crying about Berlin," and both the Soviet Union and United States were talking about the Berlin Crisis but simultaneously knew that the real crisis was about to erupt in Cuba.<sup>20</sup>

#### Soviet Perceptions of Washington During the Crisis

While evidence (such as Politburo minutes) necessary to judge the evolution of Kremlin perceptions of Kennedy during the crisis is still lacking, and intelligence assessments remain off-limits, the reports of USSR Ambassador in Washington Dobrynin between 22 and 28 October that have emerged thus far raise some interesting questions about the accuracy and impact of Soviet reporting on its "main enemy" at a critical moment. How is one to evaluate, for example, a cable sent over Dobrynin's name on 25 October 1962 relaying gossip around the bar of the Washington Press Club at 3 o'clock in the morning to the effect that Kennedy had "supposedly taken a decision to invade Cuba" that night or the next one? Of similarly questionable accuracy was Dobrynin's "line-up" of hawks and doves within the Kennedy Administration as reported (without giving sources) in a cable of 25 October—listing Robert Kennedy, McNamara, National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy and the military as the most ardent supporters of an attack on Cuba, and Secretary of State Dean G. Rusk and Treasury Secretary Douglas Dillon as holding a more "restrained" and "cautious" position; actually, although almost all members of the Excomm shifted their positions during the "13 Days" of the crisis, some more than once, Robert Kennedy and McNamara had been among the less militant, preferring a blockade to an immediate airstrike, while Dillon had more frequently sympathized with military action. Perhaps most interesting, though, in this assessment is the Soviet diplomat's jaundiced view of John F. Kennedy, who is described as a "hot-tempered gambler" who might be tempted into an "adventurist step" because his reputation, political future, and 1964 re-election had been put at stake.<sup>21</sup>

Many other interesting details emerge from Dobrynin's accounts—above all the evolution of his back-channel relationship with Robert F. Kennedy, the president's brother and Attorney General (see box)—but perhaps most interesting are the possibilities such documents offer for reassessing with far more precision how



nuclear adversaries perceive (and misperceive) each other during crises.

#### At the United Nations

The documents from the United Nations also permit a much fuller analysis of the difficult U.S.-Soviet negotiations in New York to work out the terms to resolve the crisis, particularly in combination with the large amount of American documents on the talks between McCloy and various Soviet envoys that have been declassified by the State Department in recent years.<sup>22</sup> Issues dealt with at length include the terms of verifying the withdrawal of Soviet missiles from Cuba, haggling over which Soviet weapons should be removed under the rubric of "offensive" weapons, and a good deal of give-and-take over the basic divisions between the United States and Cuba. One dog that did not bark in New York City was that of U.S. withdrawal of Jupiter missiles from Turkey—a subject that was covered in a special understanding reached between Robert Kennedy and Dobrynin in Washington—and one finds (on November 1) a firm instruction from Gromyko in Moscow to "Comrades" Kuznetsov and Zorin "not in any circumstances" to touch on the Turkish issue (despite its having been raised only days earlier in Khrushchev's public October 27 letter to Kennedy), "since it is the subject of direct negotiations between Washington and Moscow."

The documents also permit a far fuller analysis of the role of the United Nations, and particularly Acting Secretary General U Thant, in trying to navigate a delicate neutral role between the superpowers and actively seeking a United Nations role in the resolution of the crisis. Writing both Khrushchev and Kennedy to propose compromise measures to assuage the crisis, traveling to Cuba to seek Castro's approval for UN inspection of the missile removals, negotiating with Mikoyan, Kuznetsov, and Zorin over the mechanisms to conclude the dispute, U Thant emerges as a fuller figure, particularly as the Soviets courted his support (by backing his inspection plan) even at the price of additional tensions with Havana.

#### Soviet-Cuban (and Khrushchev-Castro) Tensions

The reports of Soviet envoys' reports dealing with Cuba, particularly those of USSR ambassador Alekseev in Havana, add to the emerging story of differences between Khrushchev and Castro that has long been known of in general but which became far more vivid and concrete with the appearance, first, of the third volume of Khrushchev's posthumously-published tape-recorded memoirs in 1990,<sup>23</sup> followed by the release later that year of the Castro-Khrushchev correspondence at the height of the crisis,<sup>24</sup> and finally, in January 1992, with the holding of an oral history conference on the crisis in Havana with Castro's enthusiastic participation.<sup>25</sup>

From a peak of ostensible revolutionary solidarity in the early days of the crisis, Soviet-Cuban ties became strained as the crisis wore on by a series of disagreements—from Moscow's concern that Cuban zeal (reflected in the shooting down of an American U-2 plane on October 27) might provoke a U.S. invasion, to Khrushchev's belief (hotly disputed by Castro) that the Cuban leader had advocated a recourse to nuclear war (if the U.S. attacked Cuba) in his cable to Khrushchev on October 26, to Khrushchev's failure to consult with Castro before agreeing to Kennedy's terms



for withdrawing the missiles on October 28, to a dispute over whether to permit UN inspection of Soviet ships in Cuban ports to verify the withdrawal of missiles, to a Cuban anger over Moscow's succumbing to Washington's demand to pull out Soviet IL-28 bombers as well as the nuclear missiles.

The alarming reports received by Moscow from its envoy in Havana helped lead Khrushchev to dispatch his trusted trouble-shooter, Anastas Mikoyan, to smooth the Cubans' ruffled feathers, and the Soviet records of Mikoyan's conversations with Cuban leaders in early November 1962, published in Bulletin 5, dramatically reveal the emotional rift which had emerged between the two communist allies.<sup>26</sup> (Cuban authorities subsequently released their own minutes of two of those conversations, which are printed below; see box.)

The Alekseev cables printed in the current Bulletin, when read in conjunction with the other sources noted above (particularly the Castro-Khrushchev correspondence) helps show how these tensions developed. On October 23 and 25, as the crisis mounted, Alekseev sent highly positive reports on the Cuban people's "calm," confidence, and preparedness for military confrontation, even noting that the imminent danger had prompted a "special business-like efficiency and energy" that had even dispelled the "ostentation and verbosity that are characteristic of Cubans." In the second of the aforementioned cables, however, a glimmer of disagreement appears when Alekseev states that Castro "approves of our policy of not giving in to provocations, and [avoiding] unnecessary conflicts," yet at the same time "expressed a belief in the necessity of shooting down one or two piratic American [reconnaissance] planes over Cuban territory." Another potential disagreement begins to surface when U Thant explores using Cuban President Oswaldo Dorticos' proposal to the UN General Assembly of October 8—in which the Cuban said a guaranteed U.S. pledge of non-aggression against Cuba would remove the need for Cuban military preparations; while Moscow echoed this formulation in Khrushchev's secret October 26 letter to Kennedy, the Cubans were now deeply distrustful that such a promise could be trusted.

By October 27, a new fissure had opened up over Khrushchev's public letter that day to Kennedy, which for the first time raised the possibility of a trade of Soviet missiles in Cuba for U.S. Jupiter missiles in Turkey—an idea raised without regard to the sensibilities of the Cubans, who thought they had an iron-clad agreement with Moscow to deploy the missiles that could not be "swapped" for American missiles elsewhere in the world. When Gromyko dispatched a message to Castro through the Soviet Embassy in Havana informing him that it would be "advisable" for him to quickly endorse Khrushchev's letter to Kennedy, Castro responded via Alekseev complimenting Khrushchev's "great diplomatic skill" but also noting that it had provoked "symptoms of a certain confusion in various sectors of the Cuban population and among some members of the military," who were asking "whether it constitutes a rejection by the USSR of its former obligations." Castro also defended the downing of the American U-2 that day, brushing aside Alekseev's admonition not to "aggravate the situation and initiate provocations."

On the following day, October 28, Cuban anger deepened as Moscow and Washington settled the crisis over their heads, and to add insult to injury Moscow began pressuring Castro to agree to allow United Nations inspectors to examine the Soviet missile sites on the island to verify that work had stopped. "Confusion and bewilderment are reigning inside the Cuban leadership" as a result



of Khrushchev's agreement to dismantle the missiles, Dorticos told Alekseev, adding that "under the present conditions of great patriotic enthusiasm of our people this report would be perceived by the infinitely electrified masses as a cold shower." Alekseev's excuses that technical problems had delayed the sending to Havana of an advance copy of Khrushchev's letter to Kennedy—which had been read out over Moscow Radio before Castro (let alone Kennedy) received a copy—made hardly a dent in the "picture of incomprehension" painted by another senior official, Carlos Rafael Rodriguez.

In subsequent days, as Castro and Khrushchev jousted in their correspondence and Cuban forces continued to fire on American U-2 planes, the Soviets implored the Cubans to display "self-restraint" and not take actions that could "give the aggressors a pretext to blame our side," and vainly reiterated that "we consider it necessary" to satisfy U Thant's desire to have the UN conduct on-site inspections on Cuban territory—a demand Castro and the Cuban leadership angrily rejected in an open show of defiance.

But it was Khrushchev's letter of October 30 that sent Castro's anger to an even higher pitch; in it the Soviet leader acknowledged that "some Cubans" wished that he had not declared his willingness to withdraw the nuclear missiles, but that the alternative would have been to "be carried away by certain passionate sectors of the population and [to have] refused to come to a reasonable settlement with the U.S. government," leading to a war in which millions would have died; Khrushchev also said he had viewed Castro's cable of October 26 "with extreme alarm," considering "incorrect" its proposal that the Soviet Union "be the first to launch a nuclear strike against the territory of the enemy [in response to a non-nuclear U.S. invasion of Cuba] ... Rather than a simple strike, it would have been the start of thermonuclear war."<sup>27</sup>

Reading the letter "attentively," as described in Alekseev's report of the meeting (printed below), Castro had only two, terse responses: there were not merely "some" Cuban comrades who failed to understand Khrushchev's position, "but the whole Cuban people"—and as for the second item, Castro denied proposing that Khrushchev be "the first in delivering a blow against the adversary territory," only in the event that Cuba had been attacked and Cubans and Soviets were dying together; perhaps Khrushchev misunderstood or the translation was in error. Alekseev, unfazed, not only defended the translation but made it clear that Khrushchev had understood him all too well—"even in this case [of aggression]," the Soviet envoy admonished Castro, "it is hardly possible merely to approach mechanically such an important issue and to use nuclear arms without looking for other means." The message: just as West Europeans had cause to wonder whether Americans would "trade New York for Hamburg," linking local to strategic deterrence, the Cubans were sadly mistaken if they believed Moscow was ready to undertake global thermonuclear war—with the suicidal consequences that entailed—in defense of the Cuban Revolution.

1 Books that have appeared on the crisis in English in recent years incorporating newly-available evidence include: James G. Blight and David A. Welch, *On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Reexamine the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd ed. (New York: Noonday, 1990); James G. Blight, Bruce J. Allyn, and David A. Welch, *Cuba On the Brink: Castro, the Missile Crisis, and the Soviet Collapse* (New York: Pantheon, 1993); James A. Nathan, ed., *The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992); Laurence



Chang and Peter Kornbluh, eds., *The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962: A National Security Archive Documents Reader* (New York: New Press, 1992); Robert Smith Thompson, *The Missiles of October: The Declassified Story of John F. Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992); Mary S. McAuliffe, ed., *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Washington, DC: CIA History Staff, October 1992); Gen. Anatoli I. Gribkov and Gen. William Y. Smith, *Operation ANADYR: U.S. and Soviet Generals Recount the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Chicago: Edition Q, 1994); and Dino A. Brugioni, *Eyeball to Eyeball: The Inside Story of the Cuban Missile Crisis*, updated ed. (New York: Random House, 1990, 1991, [1992?]). The volume of *Foreign Relations of the United States* covering the crisis, previously scheduled for publication in 1993, had still not appeared as of the end of 1996, but should include additional declassified U.S. documentation when it appears; mention should be made, however, of a FRUS volume that appeared in 1996 compiling Kennedy-Khrushchev correspondence and communications during the Kennedy Administration: U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Vol. VI: Kennedy-Khrushchev Exchanges* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1996). The National Security Archive, a non-governmental research institute and declassified documents repository located at the Gelman Library at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., published a microfiche collection of declassified documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1992 and maintains files of additional documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act that are available for scholarly research.

2 In *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 1 (Spring 1992), see Raymond L. Garthoff, "The Havana Conference on the Cuban Missile Crisis," pp. 2-4; in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 3 (Fall 1993), see Mark Kramer, "Tactical Nuclear Weapons, Soviet Command Authority, and the Cuban Missile Crisis," pp. 40, 42-46; and James G. Blight, Bruce J. Allyn, and David A. Welch, "KRAMER VS. KRAMER: Or, How Can You Have Revisionism in the Absence of Orthodoxy?" pp. 41, 47-50; in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 5 (Spring 1995), see Philip Brenner and James G. Blight, "Cuba, 1962: The Crisis and Cuban-Soviet Relations: Fidel Castro's Secret 1968 Speech," pp. 1, 81-85; Alexander Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, "Using KGB Documents: The Scali-Feklisov Channel in the Cuban Missile Crisis," pp. 58, 60-62; Raymond L. Garthoff, intro., "Russian Foreign Ministry Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis," pp. 58, 63-77; Vladislav M. Zubok, "'Dismayed by the Actions of the Soviet Union': Mikoyan's talks with Fidel Castro and the Cuban leadership, November 1962," pp. 59, 89-92, 93-109, 159; Mark Kramer, "The 'Lessons' of the Cuban Missile Crisis for Warsaw Pact Nuclear Operations," pp. 59, 110, 112-115, 160 (see corrected version in this issue); Jim Hershberg, "Anatomy of a Controversy: Anatoly F. Dobrynin's Meeting With Robert F. Kennedy, Saturday, 27 October 1962," pp. 75, 77-80; and Georgy Shakhnazarov, "Fidel Castro, Glasnost, and the Caribbean Crisis," pp. 83, 87-89.

3 Although it appears that verbatim records of meetings of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CC CPSU) Politburo may not exist for this period, the declassification of notes of Kremlin discussions concerning the 1956 Polish and Hungarian Crises, taken by V.M. Malin, prompts hope that similar materials may soon become available in Moscow. A full report on the Malin notes on the 1956 crises, translated, introduced, and annotated by Mark Kramer, appears elsewhere in this Bulletin.

4 For Kennedy-Khrushchev correspondence, see FRUS, 1961-1963,



vol. VI: Kennedy-Khrushchev Exchanges, cited above, which includes many exchanges during the missile crisis declassified by the U.S. government in 1991 in response to a Freedom of Information Act filed by the National Security Archive; these were first published in a special Spring 1992 issue of Problems of Communism. Correspondence between Castro and Khrushchev during the crisis was published in November 1990 in the Cuban Communist Party newspaper Granma; an English translation can be found in an appendix of Blight, Allyn, and Welch, Cuba On the Brink, 474-491.

5 On the Soviet military during the crisis, see Gribkov and Smith, Operation ANADYR, cited above; Soviet military evidence on the crisis was also presented in a conference in Moscow in September 1994 organized by the then-head of the Russian Archival Service, R. Pikhov.

6 See Alekseev to Foreign Ministry, 7 September 1962, in CWIHP Bulletin 5 (Spring 1995), 63.

7 Telegram from Gromyko to Foreign Ministry, 19 October 1962, CWIHP Bulletin 5 (Spring 1995), 66-67.

8 James G. Hershberg, "Before 'The Missiles of October': Did Kennedy Plan a Military Strike Against Cuba?" in Nathan, ed., The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited, 237-280, a slightly revised version of an article that appeared in Diplomatic History 14 (Spring 1990), 163-198.

9 "Notes Taken from Transcripts of Meetings of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, October-November 1962, dealing with the Cuban Missile Crisis (handwritten notes were made in 1976 and typed in 1993)," released under the Freedom of Information Act, copy made available by National Security Archive.

10 Historical Division, Joint Secretariat, Joint Chiefs of Staff, April 1981, "Joint Chiefs of Staff Special Historical Study: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and US Military Responses to the Threat of Castro's Cuba," pp. 11-12; the report, formerly Top Secret, was declassified on 7 May 1996 and released under the Freedom of Information Act; a copy was made available courtesy of the National Security Archive.

11 In correspondence between the JCS and the National Archives in 1993, subsequently obtained and made available to CWIHP by William Burr of the National Security Archive, the JCS acknowledged that in August 1974, the Secretary, JCS had decided to destroy systematically all transcripts of JCS meetings between 1947 and 1974, as well as subsequent meetings after a six-month waiting period. (August 1974 was, coincidentally or not, the month that Richard M. Nixon resigned the presidency in part, many said, due to his failure to destroy the Watergate tapes.) This reason given for this action was that the transcripts "did not constitute official minutes of the meetings but were merely working papers reflecting the reporter's version of events." In 1978, the JCS communication to the National Archives noted, "The practice of recording the meetings terminated in August of 1978 and all materials were subsequently destroyed."

The only exception to this destruction of records, it was reported, was that the JCS History Office took "notes (approximately 30 typed pages) from selected transcripts relating to the Cuban Missile Crisis and various other crises through the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war"—hence the notation on the top of the Cuban Missile Crisis notes in which the McNamara quotation appears that they were "handwritten notes were made in 1976 and typed in 1993."

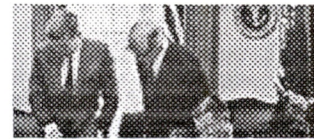
The letter from the JCS to the National Archives reads as follows:





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THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS, 1962:  
THE 40th ANNIVERSARY



## *Anatomy of a Controversy*

Anatoly F. Dobrynin's Meeting  
With Robert F. Kennedy,  
Saturday, 27 October 1962

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THE COLD WAR INTERNATIONAL  
HISTORY PROJECT BULLETIN  
Issue 5, Spring 1995

by Jim Hershberg

If the Cuban Missile Crisis was the most dangerous passage of the Cold War, the most dangerous moment of the Cuban Missile Crisis was the evening of Saturday, 27 October 1962, when the resolution of the crisis—war or peace—appeared to hang in the balance. While Soviet ships had not attempted to break the U.S. naval blockade of Cuba, Soviet nuclear missile bases remained on the island and were rapidly becoming operational, and pressure on President Kennedy to order an air strike or invasion was mounting, especially after an American I-2 reconnaissance plane was shot down over Cuba that Saturday afternoon and its pilot killed. Hopes that a satisfactory resolution to the crisis could be reached between Washington and Moscow had dimmed, moreover, when a letter from Soviet leader Nikita S. Khrushchev arrived Saturday morning demanding that the United States agree to remove its Jupiter missiles from Turkey in exchange for a Soviet removal of missiles from Cuba. The letter struck U.S. officials as an ominous hardening of the Soviet position from the previous day's letter from Khrushchev, which had omitted any mention of American missiles in Turkey but had instead



implied that Washington's pledge not to invade Cuba would be sufficient to obviate the need for Soviet nuclear protection of Castro's revolution.

On Saturday evening, after a day of tense discussions within the "ExComm" or Executive Committee of senior advisers, President Kennedy decided on a dual strategy—a formal letter to Khrushchev accepting the implicit terms of his October 26 letter (a U.S. non-invasion pledge in exchange for the verifiable departure of Soviet nuclear missiles), coupled with private assurances to Khrushchev that the United States would speedily take out its missiles from Turkey, but only on the basis of a secret understanding, not as an open agreement that would appear to the public, and to NATO allies, as a concession to blackmail. The U.S. president elected to transmit this sensitive message through his brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, who met in his office at the Justice Department with Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin.

That meeting has long been recognized as a turning point in the crisis, but several aspects of it have been shrouded in mystery and confusion. One concerned the issue of the Jupiter missiles in Turkey: U.S. officials maintained that neither John nor Robert Kennedy promised to withdraw the Jupiters as a *quid pro quo*, or concession, in exchange for the removal of the Soviet missiles from Cuba, or as part of an explicit agreement, deal, or pledge, but had merely informed Dobrynin that Kennedy had planned to take out the American missiles in any event. This was the version of events depicted in the first published account of the RFK-Dobrynin meeting by one of the participants, in Robert F. Kennedy's *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis*, posthumously published in 1969, a year after he was assassinated while seeking the Democratic nomination for president. While *Thirteen Days* depicted RFK as rejecting any firm agreement to withdraw the Jupiters, this was also the first public indication that the issue had even been privately discussed.

With Dobrynin obviously unable to publish his own version—he remained Moscow's ambassador in Washington until 1986, and Soviet diplomats were not in the habit of publishing tell-all exposés prior to glasnost—the first important Soviet account of the event to emerge was contained in the tape-recorded memoirs of deposed Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, which were smuggled to the West and published in 1970 (after Khrushchev's death, additional installments saw print in the West in 1974 and 1990). The account of the RFK-Dobrynin meeting in *Khrushchev Remembers*, in the form of a paraphrase from memory of Dobrynin's report, did not directly touch upon the secret discussions concerning the Jupiters, but



did raise eyebrows with its claim that Robert F. Kennedy had fretted to Dobrynin that if his brother did not approve an attack on Cuba soon, the American military might overthrow him and seize power." The second volume of Khrushchev's memoirs (*Khrushchev Remembers: The Last Testament*), published posthumously in 1974, touched only briefly on the Robert Kennedy-Dobrynin meeting, but included the flat statement (on p. 512) that "President Kennedy said that in exchange for the withdrawal of our missiles, he would remove American missiles from Turkey and Italy," although he described this "pledge" as "symbolic" since the rockets "were already obsolete."

Over the years, many scholars of the Cuban Missile Crisis came strongly to suspect that Robert Kennedy had, in fact, relayed a pledge from his brother to take out the Jupiters from Turkey in exchange for the Soviet removal of nuclear missiles from Cuba, so long as Moscow kept the swap secret; yet senior former Kennedy Administration officials, such as then-National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy and then-Secretary of State Dean Rusk, continued to insist that RFK had passed on no more than an informal assurance rather than an explicit promise or agreement.

The first authoritative admission on the U.S. side that the Jupiters had actually been part of a "deal" came at a conference in Moscow in January 1989, after glasnost had led Soviet (and then Cuban) former officials to participate in international scholarly efforts to reconstruct and assess the history of the crisis. At that meeting, former Kennedy speechwriter Theodore Sorensen (and the uncredited editor of *Thirteen Days*) admitted, after prodding from Dobrynin, that he had taken it upon himself to edit out a "very explicit" reference to the inclusion of the Jupiters in the final deal to settle the crisis.

Now Dobrynin's original, contemporaneous, and dramatic cable of the meeting, alluded to in some accounts by Soviets (such as Anatoly Gromyko, son of the late foreign minister) with special access, has been declassified and is available at the archives of the Russian Foreign Ministry. It is reprinted in translation below, along with relevant excerpts from the other publications mentioned above. The Dobrynin cable's first publication in English, a copy obtained by the Japanese television network NHK, came last year in an appendix to *We All Lost the Cold War*, a study by Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Stein, whose commentary is also excerpted.

\* \* \* \* \*



**Robert F. Kennedy's (edited) Description**

I telephoned Ambassador Dobrynin about 7:15 P.M. and asked him to come to the Department of Justice. We met in my office at 7:45. I told him first that we knew that work was continuing on the missile bases in Cuba and that in the last few days it had been expedited. I said that in the last few hours we had learned that our reconnaissance planes flying over Cuba had been fired upon and that one of our U-2s had been shot down and the pilot killed. That for us was a most serious turn of events.

President Kennedy did not want a military conflict. He had done everything possible to avoid a military engagement with Cuba and with the Soviet Union, but now they had forced our hand. Because of the deception of the Soviet Union, our photographic reconnaissance planes would have to continue to fly over Cuba, and if the Cubans or Soviets shot at these planes, then we would have to shoot back. This would inevitably lead to further incidents and to escalation of the conflict, the implications of which were very grave indeed.

He said the Cubans resented the fact that we were violating Cuban air space. I replied that if we had not violated Cuban air space, we would still be believing what Khrushchev had said—that there would be no missiles placed in Cuba. In any case, I said, this matter was far more serious than the air space of Cuba—it involved the peoples of both of our countries and, in fact, people all over the globe.

The Soviet Union had secretly established missile bases in Cuba while at the same time proclaiming privately and publicly that this would never be done. We had to have a commitment by tomorrow that those bases would be removed. I was not giving them an ultimatum but a statement of fact. He should understand that if they did not remove those bases, we would remove them. President Kennedy had great respect for the Ambassador's country and the courage of its people. Perhaps his country might feel it necessary to take retaliatory action; but before that was over, there would be not only dead Americans but dead Russians as well.

He asked me what offer the United States was making, and I told him of the letter that President Kennedy had just transmitted to Khrushchev. He raised the question of our removing the missiles from Turkey. I said that there could be no quid pro quo or any arrangement made under this kind of threat or pressure and that in the last analysis this was a decision that would have to be made by NATO. However, I said, President Kennedy had been anxious to remove those missiles from Italy and Turkey for a long period of time. He had ordered their removal some time ago, and it was our judgment that, within a short time after this crisis was over, those missiles would be gone.

I said President Kennedy wished to have peaceful relations between our two countries. He wished to resolve the problems that confronted us in Europe and Southeast Asia. He wished to move forward on the control of nuclear weapons. However, we could make progress on these matters only when the crisis was behind us. Time was running out. We had only a few more hours—we needed an answer immediately from the Soviet Union. I said we must have it the next day.

I returned to the White House....

[Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: New American Library, 1969), 107-109.]

\* \* \* \* \*

### Khrushchev's Description

The climax came after five or six days, when our ambassador to Washington, Anatoly Dobrynin, reported that the President's brother, Robert Kennedy, had come to see him on an unofficial visit. Dobrynin's report went something like this:

"Robert Kennedy looked exhausted. One could see from his eyes that he had not slept for days. He himself said that he had not been home for six days and nights. 'The President is in a grave situation,' Robert Kennedy said, 'and does not know how to get out of it. We are under very



severe stress. In fact we are under pressure from our military to use force against Cuba. Probably at this very moment the President is sitting down to write a message to Chairman Khrushchev. We want to ask you, Mr. Dobrynin, to pass President Kennedy's message to Chairman Khrushchev through unofficial channels. President Kennedy implores Chairman Khrushchev to accept his offer and to take into consideration the peculiarities of the American system. Even though the President himself is very much against starting a war over Cuba, an irreversible chain of events could occur against his will. That is why the President is appealing directly to Chairman Khrushchev for his help in liquidating this conflict. If the situation continues much longer, the President is not sure that the military will not overthrow him and seize power. The American army could get out of control."

[*Khrushchev Remembers*, intro., commentary, and notes by Edward Crankshaw, trans. and ed. by Strobe Talbott (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970; citation from paperback edition, New York: Bantam, 1971), pp. 551-52]

\* \* \* \* \*

#### Sorensen's "Confession":

...the president [Kennedy] recognized that, for Chairman Khrushchev to withdraw the missiles from Cuba, it would be undoubtedly helpful to him if he could say at the same time to his colleagues on the Presidium, "And we have been assured that the missiles will be coming out of Turkey." And so, after the ExComm meeting [on the evening of 27 October 1962], as I'm sure almost all of you know, a small group met in President Kennedy's office, and he instructed Robert Kennedy—at the suggestion of Secretary of State [Dean] Rusk—to deliver the letter to Ambassador Dobrynin for referral to Chairman Khrushchev, but to add orally what was not in the letter: that the missiles would come out of Turkey.

Ambassador Dobrynin felt that Robert Kennedy's book did not adequately express that the "deal" on

the Turkish missiles was part of the resolution of the crisis. And here I have a confession to make to my colleagues on the American side, as well as to others who are present. I was the editor of Robert Kennedy's book. It was, in fact, a diary of those thirteen days. And his diary was very explicit that this was part of the deal; but at that time it was still a secret even on the American side, except for the six of us who had been present at that meeting. So I took it upon myself to edit that out of his diaries, and that is why the Ambassador is somewhat justified in saying that the diaries are not as explicit as his conversation.

[Sorensen comments, in Bruce J. Allyn, James G. Blight, and David A. Welch, eds., *Back to the Brink: Proceedings of the Moscow Conference on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, January 27-28, 1989 (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992), pp. 92-93]

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#### **Accounts of Former U.S. Officials:**

##### **McGeorge Bundy:**

... Later [on Saturday], accepting a proposal from Dean Rusk, [John F.] Kennedy instructed his brother to tell Ambassador Dobrynin that while there could be no bargain over the missiles that had been supplied to Turkey, the president himself was determined to have them removed and would attend to the matter once the present crisis was resolved—as long as no one in Moscow called that action part of a bargain. [p. 406]

...The other part of the oral message [to Dobrynin] was proposed by Dean Rusk: that we should tell Khrushchev that while there could be no deal over the Turkish missiles, the president was determined to get them out and would do so once the Cuban crisis was resolved. The proposal was quickly supported by the rest of us [in addition to Bundy and Rusk, those present included President Kennedy, McNamara, RFK, George Ball, Roswell Gilpatrick, Llewellyn Thompson, and Theodore



Sorensen]. Concerned as we all were by the cost of a public bargain struck under pressure at the apparent expense of the Turks, and aware as we were from the day's discussion that for some, even in our own closest councils, even this unilateral private assurance might appear to betray an ally, we agreed without hesitation that no one not in the room was to be informed of this additional message. Robert Kennedy was instructed to make it plain to Dobrynin that the same secrecy must be observed on the other side, and that any Soviet reference to our assurance would simply make it null and void. [pp. 432-441]

.. There was no leak. As far as I know, none of the nine of us told anyone else what had happened. We denied in every forum that there was any deal, and in the narrowest sense what we said was usually true, as far as it went. When the orders were passed that the Jupiters must come out, we gave the plausible and accurate—if incomplete—explanation that the missile crisis had convinced the president once and for all that he did not want those missiles there.... [p. 434]

[from McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices About the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Random House, 1988)]

#### **Dean Rusk:**

Even though Soviet ships had turned around, time was running out. We made this very clear to Khrushchev. Earlier in the week Bobby Kennedy told Ambassador Dobrynin that if the missile were not withdrawn immediately, the crisis would move into a different and dangerous military phase. In his book *Khrushchev Remembers*, Khrushchev states that Robert Kennedy told Dobrynin that the military might take over. Khrushchev either genuinely misunderstood or deliberately misused Bobby's statement. Obviously there was never any threat of a military takeover in this country. We wondered about Khrushchev's situation, even whether some Soviet general or member of the Politburo would put a pistol to Khrushchev's head and say, "Mr. Chairman, launch those missiles or we'll blow your head off!"

...In framing a response [to Khrushchev's second letter of Saturday, October 27], the president, Bundy, McNamara, Bobby Kennedy, and I met in the Oval Office, where after some discussion I suggested that since the Jupiters in Turkey were coming out in any event, we should inform the Russians of this so that this irrelevant question would not complicate the solution of the missile sites in Cuba. We agreed that Bobby should inform Ambassador Dobrynin orally. Shortly after we returned to our offices, I telephoned Bobby to underline that he should pass this along to Dobrynin only as information, not a public pledge. Bobby told me that he was then sitting with Dobrynin and had already talked with him. Bobby later told me that Dobrynin called this message "very important information."

[Dean Rusk as told to Richard Rusk, *As I Saw It* (New York: Norton & Co., 1990), pp. 238-240]

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**Dobrynin's Cable to the Soviet Foreign Ministry, 27 October 1962:**

TOP SECRET Making Copies Prohibited Copy  
No. 1

**CIPHERED TELEGRAM**

Late tonight R. Kennedy invited me to come see him. We talked alone.

The Cuban crisis, R. Kennedy began, continues to quickly worsen. We have just received a report that an unarmed American plane was shot down while carrying out a reconnaissance flight over Cuba. The military is demanding that the President arm such planes and respond to fire with fire. The USA government will have to do this.

I interrupted R. Kennedy and asked him, what right American planes had to fly over Cuba at all, crudely violating its sovereignty and accepted international norms? How would the USA have reacted if foreign planes appeared over its territory?



"We have a resolution of the Organization of American states that gives us the right to such overflights," R. Kennedy quickly replied.

I told him that the Soviet Union, like all peace-loving countries, resolutely rejects such a "right" or, to be more exact, this kind of true lawlessness, when people who don't like the social-political situation in a country try to impose their will on it—a small state where the people themselves established and maintained [their system]. "The OAS resolution is a direct violation of the UN Charter," I added, "and you, as the Attorney General of the USA, the highest American legal entity, should certainly know that."

R. Kennedy said that he realized that we had different approaches to these problems and it was not likely that we could convince each other. But now the matter is not in these differences, since time is of the essence. "I want," R. Kennedy stressed, "to lay out the current alarming situation the way the president sees it. He wants N.S. Khrushchev to know this. This is the thrust of the situation now."

"Because of the plane that was shot down, there is now strong pressure on the president to give an order to respond with fire if fired upon when American reconnaissance planes are flying over Cuba. The USA can't stop these flights, because this is the only way we can quickly get information about the state of construction of the missile bases in Cuba, which we believe pose a very serious threat to our national security. But if we start to fire in response—a chain reaction will quickly start that will be very hard to stop. The same thing in regard to the essence of the issue of the missile bases in Cuba. The USA government is determined to get rid of those bases—up to, in the extreme case, of bombing them, since, I repeat, they pose a great threat to the security of the USA. But in response to the bombing of these bases, in the course of which Soviet specialists might suffer, the Soviet government will undoubtedly respond with the same against us, somewhere in Europe. A real war will begin, in which millions of Americans and Russians will die. We want to avoid that any way we can, I'm sure that the government of the USSR has the

same wish. However, taking time to find a way out [of the situation] is very risky (here R. Kennedy mentioned as if in passing that there are many unreasonable heads among the generals, and not only among the generals, who are itching for a fight'). The situation might get out of control, with irreversible consequences."

"In this regard," R. Kennedy said, 'the president considers that a suitable basis for regulating the entire Cuban conflict might be the letter N.S. Khrushchev sent on October 26 and the letter in response from the President, which was sent off today to N.S. Khrushchev through the US Embassy in Moscow. The most important thing for us,' R. Kennedy stressed, "is to get as soon as possible the agreement of the Soviet government to halt further work on the construction of the missile bases in Cuba and take measures under international control that would make it impossible to use these weapons. In exchange the government of the USA is ready, in addition to repealing all measures on the "quarantine," to give the assurances that there will not be any invasion of Cuba and that other countries of the Western Hemisphere are ready to give the same assurances—the US government is certain of this."

"And what about Turkey?" I asked R. Kennedy.

"If that is the only obstacle to achieving the regulation I mentioned earlier, then the president doesn't see any unsurmountable difficulties in resolving this issue," replied R. Kennedy. "The greatest difficulty for the president is the public discussion of the issue of Turkey. Formally the deployment of missile bases in Turkey was done by a special decision of the NATO Council. To announce now a unilateral decision by the president of the USA to withdraw missile bases from Turkey—this would damage the entire structure of NATO and the US position as the leader of NATO, where, as the Soviet government knows very well, there are many arguments. In short, if such a decision were announced now it would seriously tear apart NATO."

"However, President Kennedy is ready to come to agree on that question with N.S. Khrushchev, too."



I think that in order to withdraw these bases from Turkey," R. Kennedy said, 'we need 4-5 months. This is the minimal amount of time necessary for the US government to do this, taking into account the procedures that exist within the NATO framework. On the whole Turkey issue," R. Kennedy added, "if Premier N.S. Khrushchev agrees with what I've said, we can continue to exchange opinions between him and the president, using him, R. Kennedy and the Soviet ambassador. "However, the president can't say anything public in this regard about Turkey," R. Kennedy said again. R. Kennedy then warned that his comments about Turkey are extremely confidential; besides him and his brother, only 2-3 people know about it in Washington.

"That's all that he asked me to pass on to N.S. Khrushchev," R. Kennedy said in conclusion. "The president also asked N.S. Khrushchev to give him an answer (through the Soviet ambassador and R. Kennedy) if possible within the next day (Sunday) on these thoughts in order to have a business-like, clear answer in principle. [He asked him] not to get into a wordy discussion, which might drag things out. The current serious situation, unfortunately, is such that there is very little time to resolve this whole issue. Unfortunately, events are developing too quickly. The request for a reply tomorrow," stressed R. Kennedy, "is just that—a request, and not an ultimatum. The president hopes that the head of the Soviet government will understand him correctly."

I noted that it went without saying that the Soviet government would not accept any ultimatums and it was good that the American government realized that. I also reminded him of N.S. Khrushchev's appeal in his last letter to the president to demonstrate state wisdom in resolving this question. Then I told R. Kennedy that the president's thoughts would be brought to the attention of the head of the Soviet government. I also said that I would contact him as soon as there was a reply. In this regard, R. Kennedy gave me a number of a direct telephone line to the White House.

In the course of the conversation, R. Kennedy

noted that he knew about the conversation that television commentator Scali had yesterday with an Embassy adviser on possible ways to regulate the Cuban conflict [one-and-a-half lines whited out]

I should say that during our meeting R. Kennedy was very upset; in any case, I've never seen him like this before. True, about twice he tried to return to the topic of "deception," (that he talked about so persistently during our previous meeting), but he did so in passing and without any edge to it. He didn't even try to get into fights on various subjects, as he usually does, and only persistently returned to one topic: time is of the essence and we shouldn't miss the chance.

After meeting with me he immediately went to see the president, with whom, as R. Kennedy said, he spends almost all his time now.

27/X-62 A. DOBRYNIN

[Source: Russian Foreign Ministry archives, translation from copy provided by NHK, in Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), appendix, pp. 523-526, with minor revisions.]

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**Lebow and Stein comment,  
*We All Lost the Cold War* (excerpt):**

The cable testifies to the concern of John and Robert Kennedy that military action would trigger runaway escalation. Robert Kennedy told Dobrynin of his government's determination to ensure the removal of the Soviet missiles in Cuba, and his belief that the Soviet Union "will undoubtedly respond with the same against us, somewhere in Europe." Such an admission seems illogical if the administration was using the threat of force to compel the Soviet Union to withdraw its missiles from Cuba. It significantly raised the expected cost to the United States of an attack against the missiles, thereby weakening the



credibility of the American threat. To maintain or enhance that credibility, Kennedy would have had to discount the probability of Soviet retaliation to Dobrynin. That nobody in the government was certain of Khrushchev's response makes Kennedy's statement all the more remarkable.

It is possible that Dobrynin misquoted Robert Kennedy. However, the Soviet ambassador was a careful and responsible diplomat. At the very least, Kennedy suggested that he thought that Soviet retaliation was likely. Such an admission was still damaging to compellence. It seems likely that Kennedy was trying to establish the basis for a more cooperative approach to crisis resolution. His brother, he made clear, was under enormous pressure from a coterie of generals and civilian officials who were "itching for a fight." This also was a remarkable admission for the attorney general to make. The pressure on the president to attack Cuba, as Kennedy explained at the beginning of the meeting, had been greatly intensified by the destruction of an unarmed American reconnaissance plane. The president did not want to use force, in part because he recognized the terrible consequences of escalation, and was therefore requesting Soviet assistance to make it unnecessary.

This interpretation is supported by the president's willingness to remove the Jupiter missiles as a quid pro quo for the withdrawal of missiles in Cuba, and his brother's frank confession that the only obstacle to dismantling the Jupiters were political. "Public discussion" of a missile exchange would damage the United States' position in NATO. For this reason, Kennedy revealed, "besides himself and his brother, only 2-3 people know about it in Washington." Khrushchev would have to cooperate with the administration to keep the American concession a secret.

Most extraordinary of all is the apparent agreement between Dobrynin and Kennedy to treat Kennedy's de facto ultimatum as "a request, and not an ultimatum." This was a deliberate attempt to defuse as much as possible the hostility that Kennedy's request for an answer by the next day was likely to provoke in Moscow. So too was

Dobrynin's next sentence: "I noted that it went without saying that the Soviet government would not accept any ultimatum and it was good that the American government realized that."

Prior meetings between Dobrynin and Kennedy had sometimes degenerated into shouting matches. On this occasion, Dobrynin indicates, the attorney general kept his emotions in check and took the ambassador into his confidence in an attempt to cooperate on the resolution of the crisis. This two-pronged strategy succeeded where compellence alone might have failed. It gave Khrushchev positive incentives to remove the Soviet missiles and reduced the emotional cost to him of the withdrawal. He responded as Kennedy and Dobrynin had hoped.

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